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Normal Bedfellows

The people cannot decide until somebody decides who are the people.

—IVOR JENNINGS, *THE APPROACH TO SELF-GOVERNMENT*

The organized crime boss of today is the insta-patriot and freedom fighter of tomorrow.

—ANDREW BOWEN, “COERCIVE DIPLOMACY AND THE DONBAS”

This chapter develops three concepts: separatism, organized crime, and the relation between the two. I begin by drawing on social scientific insights to dispel some common misconceptions about, in turn, separatist movements and mafias. By bridging two compartmentalized subfields, we discover just how natural the connections between them are. Finally, I delineate two tools—a Simmelian triadic model of state-separatist-mafia relations, and typology of mafias across three regions—for explaining the phenomenon.

Separatism

Scholars have tackled the timing of secessions, patron state support for separatism, structural determinants of torn states, the effect of military intervention on separatist movements, border reconfigurations as “rightsizing,” separatism as ethnic politics, Asia-Europe similarities in separatist-government interaction, and international recognition of secessionist identities and borders—all without attention to organized crime.¹ But there are compelling reasons to inject mafias into the core of our conceptualization of separatism.

UNDERDEVELOPMENT

Though Western separatist movements receive tremendous attention, global dynamics can hardly be understood from this subset of exceptional cases.

Investigations of torn states in underdeveloped regions tend to be regimented by area studies. For example, an outstanding literature on “de facto” and “unrecognized” states is limited to post-Communist Eurasia.² Other works, on warlord politics and “subnationalism,” are restricted to sub-Saharan Africa.³ Even as they overlap, both hesitate to generalize insights to separatism globally. Meanwhile, studies generalizing from the advanced democracies are bold and sweeping. Abstract conceptualizations of separatism disregard non-Western torn states entirely.⁴ John Doyle (2010) puts greater emphasis on the United States, Canada, and Western Europe than on the rest of the world combined. Ian S. Lustick’s (1993) explanation of border reconfiguration as state expansion/contraction dynamics essentially uses the British (Ireland) and French (Algeria) cases to theorize about Palestine, and then the world.⁵ The likes of the Québécois, Catalans, and Flemish often serve as empirical templates for “theorizing” separatism globally.

But separatism is not the proverbial first world problem. It is overwhelmingly located in poor, underdeveloped societies with weak, undemocratic, and criminalized states. The most comprehensive data set of 464 self-determination movements found that affluent and democratic countries have hosted a modest minority of separatist cases from 1945 to 2012.⁶ After the Cold War (1990–2012), their share fell further.⁷ Moreover, separatists in wealthy and stable countries are tamed because states with rich democratic traditions are more effective at preventing separatism. The mere existence of a meaningful federalism, confederalism, or regionalism preempts movement mobilization. David Siroky and John Cuffe (2015, 41–43), coding 115 ethnic groups from Asia, Europe, and North America, found that those without autonomy status launched separatist movements much more frequently (45 percent) than those with some semblance of autonomy (19 percent). Those constituencies that *had* had autonomy before it was taken away from them were particularly likely to mobilize: 89 percent of ethnic groups that lost autonomy status turned to separatism, but only 21 percent of groups that have autonomy currently and 2 percent that never had it. Full of institutionalized safety valves, Western rule-of-law democracies have deep structural hinderances to separatist escalation.⁸

When compelled to compromise, furthermore, wealthy democratic host states are more likely to make concessions. They are also less likely to restrict the rights of rebellious constituencies. Separatists in rich countries have a 50 percent chance of extracting concessions; in medium-income countries, their chances are below a third; in poor societies, negligible.⁹ The reason, Michael Hechter (2000) argued, is that indirect rule inhibits separatism. But

high-capacity indirect rule is a luxury of prosperous, stable countries. Accordingly, the agendas of Western separatist movements are much more modest. Most of them have tempered their demands to benign reformist ones, notably native-language use. Some of their grievances are incomprehensible elsewhere; northern Italians, Flemings, and Catalans, for instance, boast a superior economic position compared to the host state proper. While the rest of the separatist world resents underprivilege, these three are tired of footing the bill for their unproductive compatriots.

When separatist conflict *does* escalate in rich countries, it is remarkably pacifistic. There have been zero post-1990 wars to adjudicate separatist quarrels in the advanced democracies. Elsewhere, separatism is a more pugnacious affair; 61 percent of movements globally are violent.¹⁰ These “violent movements tend to be in poorer and less democratic societies.”¹¹ Among separatist elites globally, Palestine’s Yasser Arafat is normal, while Tibet’s Dalai Lama is an outlier. Among separatist elites in developed societies, Catalonia’s Carles Puigdemont is typical, while the Irish Republican Army’s Thomas “Slab” Murphy is exceptional. One need only look at the pathos-laden spectacle of a recent Basque press conference to appreciate the chasm between separatism in the West versus the rest. The ETA—the militant wing of Basque secessionism—issued a public apology for the deaths caused in forty years of terrorism.¹² I have searched in vain for a single, comparable instance of a separatist spokesperson *apologizing* (for violence or otherwise) outside the Western democracies.

One final divergence: organized crime plays no role whatsoever in the vast majority of Western separatist movements.¹³ Elsewhere, as we will see, mafias are integral to separatism.

BORDERS

Separatism is about borders—and not merely symbolic ones, at that.

Rational choice theorists have attributed considerable cost-benefit certainty to the choices of separatists and host states.¹⁴ The decision to engage in violence, especially, has been modeled on expected government benefits, reasons for trust in civil war contexts, and economic gains and losses.¹⁵ Even the most seemingly irrational and chaotic wars, Stathis Kalyvas (2006) argued, have a logical structure to them, as the deliberate strategies and interests of elites and local actors intertwine. Separatism through civil war emerges, quite simply, when it “is profitable for potential insurgents, in that they can both survive and enjoy some probability of winning the state,” while “secession is seen to be the outcome of a series of collective decisions made by regional leaders and populations.”¹⁶ Furthermore, ethnic secession is more likely as the dilemma of “credible commitment” intensifies: the more distrustful minorities

are of majorities' willingness to secure protection and rights, the more rational separatism becomes.¹⁷

But these approaches rarely acknowledge the border-specific interests involved. First, borders determine peacetime smuggling dynamics. Separatist movements are compelled to rely on extrainstitutional funding channels. The goods they hope to deliver to their constituency instead of the host state—food, medicine, fuel, and so on—often require smuggling. The contraband that fills separatist coffers (notably narcotics) requires black marketeering. One possibility is moving across unadministered frontier zones (typically, mountains and desert). Another is to smuggle across existing host state checkpoints: via bribery, document forgery, or creative concealment. But a third option—much preferable—is to have *separatist*-controlled border infrastructure: passports, ramps, booths, watchtowers, guards, roadside sentries, license plates, and tariff stamps. The profits to be made are enormous, and the special interests involved (notably mafias) may be directly at odds with nationalist goals, complicating the instrumental rationality calculus. Second, access to war matériel is critical during violent conflict. Successfully importing arms can mean the difference between victory and annihilation. Little wonder that separatist elites are obsessed with checkpoints, buffer zones, frontline trenches, and the no-man's-lands between them. Quite apart from the symbolic value, the separatist administration of checkpoints enables espionage and the surveillance of supply lines. The cost-benefit analysis of civil war therefore frequently has more to do with securing merchandise around strategic border positions than with nationalism *per se*.¹⁸

These realities are not easy to admit publicly. Nominally, separatists are maximalist in their calls for self-determination. As good nationalists, they insist on the doctrine that national and state boundaries must coincide.¹⁹ In practice, however, they settle for less than statehood, administered by a combination of host state agents, international peacekeepers, and partial (even emblematic) separatist representation. Host states are extremely sensitive about their borders, often engaging in futile symbolic gestures to keep up appearances of territorial control. "For weak states in particular," Justin Hastings (2010, 39) points out, "borders are one of the most visible manifestations of their (sometimes otherwise nonexistent) sovereignty." On the ground, then, disputed frontiers operate through implicit agreement between separatist and host state institutions to share overlapping, ambiguous, and criminalized jurisdictions at checkpoints. Utterly inconsistent with official nationalist pieties on either side, such unofficial arrangements make certain constituencies very powerful—and very wealthy.²⁰

Rogers Brubaker (1996) has conceptualized the separatist imbroglio as a product of three forces: nationalizing states, national minorities, and external homelands.²¹ In practical terms, this is frequently manifested as porous

checkpoints administered by weakly centralized governments, minority non-officials levying “taxes” on behalf of separatists or warlords, and minority, diaspora communities on either side of the “border” that informally regulate trade and movement. Africa, notably, hosts voluminous “gray zones”: quasi-state territories that contradict formal borders but are themselves fragile, precarious polities.²² Far from resisting such arrangements, separatism thrives on them.

Accordingly, one should not exaggerate the importance of separatist rhetoric in defining rational separatist actions. “Discursive dynamics” and “frames” about ethnic boundaries do not themselves create new nation-states.²³ When disputed borders are lucrative, separatists are perfectly capable of suspending nation building altogether. Indeed, as we will explore, one thing that gangster bosses, separatist leaders, and government figureheads have in common is a superb instinct for self-preservation at the public’s expense. Hard-line positions on national perimeters change accordingly.

HETEROGENEITY

Secession is one matter, but ethnic homogenization is quite another.

Separatists promise stability and justice through “natural” ethnonational boundaries. Yet border reconfigurations aimed at ethnic or tribal homogeneity are often counterproductive. Instead of harmonizing new neighboring nations, “ethnic unmixing” perpetuates instability, civil war, and more of itself.²⁴ Brubaker (1998, 233–34) attributed this to the “architectonic illusion”: the mistaken belief that “the right territorial and institutional framework can satisfy nationalist demands, quench nationalist passions and thereby resolve national conflicts.” In this sense, separatists are the ultimate architectonic illusionists.

First, “the people” being separated remains a mystified concept with elusive boundaries.²⁵ Who, exactly, enjoys the right of secession? Groups (like nationalities) or polities (like republics)? If the former, do they have to be large enough, old enough, different enough? Should borders be political, geographic, or ethnic? If the first, should they be provincial, regional, or federal? In which historical period—Soviet, British colonial, ancient African—are “authentic” and “natural” frontiers to be found? What survey, election, or tribal council map can we possibly accept as a legitimate benchmark? Above all, who decides any of this?

Second, taken to its logical conclusion, separatist logic inspires infinite regress. Every entrepreneurial patriarch with a grievance, surveyor, and flag could warrant a new nation-state. “Why should I be a minority in your country,” a Balkan proverb asks, “when you can be a minority in mine?” More than a third of new post–Cold War entities bred their own separatist movements within the new polities. Some, like Bosnia-Herzegovina, Georgia, and Ukraine,

host *two* major separatist challengers; territorially noncontiguous, these secessionists within secessionists tear the young countries on two sides. “Once the logic of secession is admitted,” Immanuel Wallerstein (1961, 88) noted, “there is no end except in anarchy.”

Third, separatism often appears a remedy worse than the disease. Post-colonial and post-Communist state making creates leftover communities—“orphans of secession,” as John McGarry (1998) called them—stranded in new polities in which they do not feel they belong. Within newly seceded entities, separatist success creates a perverse incentive to displace and dispossess minorities.²⁶ In principle, nationalism offers two elegant solutions: “rightsizing the state”—through annexation, partition, or secession—and “rightsizing the people”—through assimilation, expulsion, or genocide.²⁷ In practice, neither looks appealing:

The assumption has usually been that secession produces homogenous states. In point of fact, neither secessionist states nor rump [i.e., host] states are homogenous. They can be made more homogenous only by the clumsiest and most unfair methods of population exchange or by policies of expulsion, always carried out with a massive dose of killing.²⁸

At a minimum, such separatist homogenization projects create perpetual refugee crises.²⁹ At most, this “dark side” of self-determination is genocidal.³⁰

Nowhere is this Gordian knot tighter than in former imperial borderlands such as Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and West Africa. In Yugoslavia, the incongruence of republics with nationalities—stemming from the Anti-Fascist Council for the National Liberation of Yugoslavia, a 1943 makeshift wartime administration—fed manipulations of identity categories by regional elites, international actors, and tendentious scholars.³¹ Titoism congealed the Macedonian nation, while Bosniak became a brand-new, salient ethnic category among Muslims. Similarly, the USSR’s fifteen republics created a tenuous ethnofederalism in tension with emergent post-Cold War conceptions of nationhood and belonging.³² Moldova-Transnistria, for example, has been repeatedly reconfigured by the Russian Empire, Romania, and the Soviets, while Joseph Stalin personally (as commissar of nationalities) switched Nagorno-Karabakh from Armenia to Azerbaijan.

Imperial carvings likewise cast a long shadow on Arab and African nationalisms.³³ It was Ottoman, Persian, and European compromises that scattered Kurds across four states, while Ottoman and British endowments molded north and south Yemenis, respectively. In Senegal, the Portuguese (Casamançais) and French (northerners) left their trace. In Nigeria, the British empowered the Hausa, Ibo, and Yoruba at the expense of the Ogoni. In Cameroon, the carving up of Germany’s colony between France and Britain continues to pit the anglophone southerners against the francophone majority. When separatist

cleavages mirror centuries-old colonial divisions, nationalist fantasies are difficult to reconcile with the heterogeneity of today's torn states.

We arrive at an important observation. If a transnational network—a mafia, for instance—traverses disputed borders in such regions, it is certain to be embedded in the dilemmas of ethnic politics.

LEGITIMACY DEFICIT

Separatism is a Sisyphean endeavor. It is difficult enough that separatists are deemed inherently illegitimate by their host state, disruptive by neighboring states, and criminal by the international community. But adding insult to injury, even the very people they purportedly seek to emancipate are often hesitant to sacrifice and fickle in their nationalist enthusiasm.

Born of the Treaty of Versailles, Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points, and Leninist nationalities policies, the doctrine of self-determination has survived the Cold War.³⁴ In principle, "nationalism can be employed equally in the service of unification or secession."³⁵ In practice, however, there is no doubt which prevailed in the twenty-first century. Of two unificationist cases (Germany and Yemen, both in 1990), one was a spectacular success. But the premature integration of North and South Yemen boomeranged into separatist bloodshed in a single generation. The harmonious secessions of Slovakia from Czechoslovakia (1993) and South Sudan from Sudan (2011) are exceptions; the likes of Namibia (1990), Eritrea (1993), and East Timor (2002)—whose border demarcations plagued them with war, displacement, and bankruptcy—are the rule.³⁶

In defense, modern nation-states have rushed to criminalize separatism. Constitutions treat it not only as offense but as *the* supreme crime. From China's Uyghurs to South Africa's Zulus, entire ethnic groups have endured persecution under the banner of antiseparatist legalisms. The UN Charter sanctifies territorial integrity. Through technicalities, International Court of Justice opinions carefully avoid condoning secession qua secession.³⁷ Host states refuse to recognize each other's separatist entities, crafting multilateral treaties—such as the Shanghai Convention against separatism—to nip secession in the bud. Compared to other insurgencies, "separatist movements tend to get less foreign support because most governments are reluctant to encourage secession even from their enemies."³⁸ Even radical proponents of the right of secession struggle to relativize its illegality under international law.³⁹ The stigma of unconstitutionality and treason lingers even after independence is achieved.

The legitimacy deficit does not end there. Frequently, the disjuncture between separatist elites and the population they represent is colossal. In a classic early statement on separatism, Anthony Smith (1979, 21)—never one to downplay ethnonational solidarity—insisted that the phenomenon cannot

be reduced to “an outlet for the expression of ethnic identity and social regeneration.” Rather, opportunistic power centers pursuing self-interest. “One of the chief sources of separatism’s continuing appeal,” Smith argued, is that it “affords a new set of avenues to power and privilege for members of strata hitherto excluded from a share in both.” The separatist demos, meanwhile, often knows not what it wants. Consider referenda. When the separatist motion is proposed in democratic conditions with free and fair elections, “the people” tend to be deeply divided. It is only when the question is put in staged, *undemocratic*, and *unfree* conditions of censorship and repression that separatism wins—and with above 90 percent consensus at that. One need only compare the referenda in Quebec (1995), in Scotland (2014), on Brexit (2016), and in Catalonia (2017) with those of the Iraqi Kurds (2005, 2017), Montenegrins (2006), and Crimeans (2014) to appreciate the difference. When the separatist dilemma is put without coercion, abstentions and “no” votes carry the day.

Secessionism’s unpopularity should not be surprising: human beings are risk averse and biased toward the status quo.⁴⁰ Citizens are much more afraid of what they might lose than hopeful of what they might gain. This dominates ordinary political decision making, let alone abnormal, high-uncertainty dilemmas such as separatist rebellions.⁴¹ Secession is a gambit; it may increase isolation, provoke host state retaliation, create an unsustainable Bantustan in the international system, or destroy the economy. The benefits of a new nation appear abstract, but the stakes in safety, livelihood, and property are concrete and salient.⁴² Ex-Yugoslavia was a striking example. Supposedly a paradigm of nationalisms outrivalling each other in mass popular support, separatism was in fact overwhelmingly opposed prior to the outbreak of war.⁴³ In summer and fall 1990, the population was asked, “Do you agree that every (Yugoslav) nation should have a national state of its own?” Sixteen percent agreed completely, 7 percent agreed partly, 61 percent did not agree at all, and 10 percent disagreed partly.⁴⁴ In regional scholarship, nationalist mythology has dispatched such facts into George Orwell’s memory hole.

Separatist movements—especially successful ones—are adept at retrospectively constructing narratives of popular support. One of nationalism’s most cherished “invented traditions” is commemorating precisely the mythology of consensus at the time of nationalist founding.⁴⁵ From Zionism to Hindu nationalism, ethnic “origin myths” not only whitewash massacres and expulsions of out-groups. They also erase in-group heterogeneity from history. In real time, however, separatists face chronic legitimacy challenges both before and during fabled periods of ethnonational awakening. The “Sleeping Beauty” view of separatism, as Hechter (2000, 6, 15) mockingly labeled it, distorts the fact that a deeply ambivalent, skeptical “Beauty” is hardly thrilled to waken.

We arrive at a paradox. On the one hand, given their structural circumstances, separatists are especially predisposed to nonlegal and extrainstitutional

(i.e., organized criminal) means. Denied normal legal channels to achieve their aims, they naturally turn elsewhere. On the other hand, precisely because of their reliance on criminal means, separatists assume an impossible burden of illegitimacy: a double stigmatization—one for their treasonous ends, and another for their criminal means. Host states relish in portraying separatist elites as criminals, repelling sympathy and support both domestically and internationally. When separatist movements do in fact ally with mafias—a perfectly normal association, we will find—the legitimacy deficit amplifies.

LONG-DISTANCE SEPARATISM

Separatism appears to be a purely domestic dispute. It is not.

External threats are the *sine qua non* of ethnonational identification and mobilization.⁴⁶ Just as nineteenth-century nationalists defined themselves in opposition to colonial empire, twenty-first-century separatists exist in relation to their host state opponent. It is by resisting the titular ethnicity that separatists define their own. The movement's trajectory is always an imperfect compromise between the host state's nation-building efforts, negotiations with the minority ethnicity seeking to separate, and international stakeholders.⁴⁷

The notion that foreign intervention molds separatist success is practically a truism.⁴⁸ Military intrusions were decisive for separatists from Southeast Asia to the Balkans.⁴⁹ Explaining Soviet secessions, one analyst remarked, "One can do worse than answer with the crude observation that 'Political elites in Russia just wanted it that way.'"⁵⁰ Nominally "domestic" factors (such as separatist tactics, ethnic identification processes, and resource mobilization) always interact with "foreign" ones (economic sanctions, ethnic migrations, neighboring state collapse, and—crucially—transnational smuggling).

To be sure, foreign support matters. Great powers routinely abuse international law regarding secession as they see fit.⁵¹ Russia detests Chechen separatism, but generates Crimean. China pressures Taiwan, but sends state-building peacekeepers to independent South Sudan. The United States deplores Ossetian independence, but celebrates Kosovo's. Secessionists cunningly navigate these diplomatic discrepancies to their advantage. Geopolitical reductionism, according to which separatists are mere pawns in grander, strategic chess games, is tempting but inadequate.⁵² Host states themselves paint their estranged foes as puppets on the strings of foreigners to discredit their indigenous base. But Nina Caspersen (2008) argues persuasively that the tendency to relegate separatists to mere instruments of their patron state sponsors is mistaken.⁵³

Separatism is also inherently international because diasporas are bedrocks of movement success.⁵⁴ Diasporas provide funding, recruit militants, and lobby patron states and other international sponsors. Refugees are especially

consequential, as forced migration instigates ethnic identification and mobilization.⁵⁵ Suffering the “anguish of displacement, the nostalgia of exile, the repatriation of funds or the brutalities of asylum seeking,” these displaced communities are often more nationalistic than their brethren in the motherland.⁵⁶ Zlatko Skrbiš (1999) calls this “long-distance nationalism”: the exaggerated attachment to national territory on the part of dislocated people. Striking examples are Tuaregs in Mali and Niger, Albanians in Serbia and Macedonia, and Kurds in Turkey, Iraq, and Syria. Cycles of population dispersion and resettlement are among the most powerful contributors to separatist momentum.

Furthermore, separatist movements observe each other through diaspora organizations and communication networks. As with other social movements, the tactics, frames, identities, and demands of separatist trailblazers are diffused regionally.⁵⁷ Albanian secessionism in Serbia ignited separatism in Macedonia. Uses of Palestinian and Kurdish symbols—flags, anthems, and uniforms—were emulated by smaller separatist movements across the Middle East. In Africa, the fiascos of Biafra and Katanga loom as a dark cloud over secessionist dreams, while the successes of Eritrea and South Sudan entice would-be governors to gamble.⁵⁸ A “tidal” effect of separatist movements inspiring each other was critical to post-Soviet nationalist mobilizations.⁵⁹ The rapid series of secessions across Eurasia prompted scholars to say “separatism is contagious” like “the common cold.”⁶⁰ Ethnic diasporas—to continue the unsympathetic metaphor—are indispensable transmitters of the disease.

One final observation. Diasporas also tend to reside where transnational organized crime happens to be embedded. An ethnocentric mafia can be a critical ingredient for the mobilization of people and extraction of resources from coethnics across disputed borders.

Transnational Organized Crime

Organized crime scholarship typically neglects separatist cases altogether or confounds them with nonseparatist ones.⁶¹ Yet today’s globalized mafias have deep structural reasons to flourish, especially in torn states.

NETWORK

A pervasive myth about organized crime is its hierarchy.

Ironically, it was not even true of the archetypal Sicilian mafia.⁶² Experts iterate that “there does not exist—and there never has existed—any secret, hierarchical and centralized criminal organization called the *mafia*.”⁶³ “Mafioso,” moreover, was “not a rank or position within a secret organization. Rather, it represented a type of position within a patron-client relationship of Sicilian

society itself.”⁶⁴ With globalization, hierarchy in transnational mafias became unattainable.⁶⁵ Even if top-down command chains were maintained nationally, cross-border ties are loose and polycentric internationally. Thus today’s Sicilian mafia is one cluster in a decentralized network of Albanian, Nigerian, and Turkish mafias stretching from Benin City to Berlin.

Organized crime remains what it has always been: a patrimonial, horizontal social structure (of the sort Max Weber observed in noncapitalistic societies). Mafias are *not* bureaucratized, impersonal hierarchies (of the type Weber saw in armies, states, and firms). Instead of pyramids, we may visualize spider webs. Hierarchy, however, is not the same as centralization. Mafia webs do indeed have a focal middle—vague, shifting, and cacophonous as it may be. Without this center, a criminal network is an assortment of vaguely interconnected gangs—mere *disorganized* crime. Additionally, “the governmental structure of mafia families is not the same as the economic structure of the organisations that actually undertake criminal activity.”⁶⁶ The political decision-making center is therefore coupled with a highly diffuse profit-making enterprise.

The *political structure*—a governing group of under ten leaders—creates rules, adjudicates disputes, regulates membership, and punishes transgressors. Much of the leaders’ power is supervisory, not managerial. They themselves cannot administer smuggling, conduct extortion, or even issue commands to individual gangsters. Rather, they define and enforce the limits of rackets—often after criminal schemes have been created without their approval. This political body may include figures associated with governments, separatist institutions, legal private enterprises, civil society groups, or other enablers. A gangster boss may control one racket (e.g., narcotics), but not another (e.g., protection); one might handle brokers in the locality, and another abroad. Rarely does a single personality—like the Turkish mafia’s Dündar Kılıç—dominate. Instead, some sort of collective decision making and power sharing emerges, frequently ad hoc, inconsistent, and defensive. While elite conflicts may produce internal rotations and external substitutions, this agenda-setting body is relatively cohesive and centralized.

But the *economic structure*—which physically administers rackets on the proverbial ground—is far more decentralized and compartmentalized within an allotted turf. This is the profit-making machine of organized crime: enforcers, informants, distributors, collectors, fixers, smugglers, and wheeler-dealers. Members often simultaneously serve in armies, militias, or other armed formations. Clustered into gangs, many of them have no idea what broader organization they are a part of except via middlepersons who liaison with the political center. For instance, Kurdish narco-distributors in the Netherlands and United Kingdom—under the same mafia umbrella—were fully unaware of each other. For a price, gangs largely administer their own rackets without

interference. Through neighborhood solidarity, surveillance, and recruitment, gangsters create lasting subcultures as well as lucrative markets. Their connections to formal institutions are restricted to low- and midlevel bribed officials.

These two structures constitute a dynamic but nebulous network. Mafias have no manifestos, membership lists, or organizational charts. We thus abandon the fetching image of criminal command pyramids on chalkboards in scenes from *The Godfather* (1972) and *The Sopranos* (1999–2007). Instead, *Once Upon a Time in America* (1984) and *Gomorrah* (2008) give better portrayals of the typical organizational structure: decentralized economic networks overlapping with a centralized political governing body.

Two implications are worth bearing in mind: this kind of network is akin to guerrilla groups, revolutionary cells, and social movement organizations; and given their structure, mafias will tend to overlap with political and economic institutions in environments where hierarchical, bureaucratized governments are limited or contested.

ROOTS AND TERRITORY

Globalization has allegedly made mafias deterritorialized, denationalized, and hypermobile. In actuality, they remain rooted.

Organized crime is notoriously embedded in extant community relations: patriarchal, occupational, residential, and above all, ethnic.⁶⁷ Tribal, clan, and kinship networks—the Albanian *fis*, the Tuareg *tawshet*, or the Palestinian *hamulas*—are the indispensable fabric into which criminal rackets are sown. The logic of rootedness is simple: “trust in the criminal world is highly fragile, particularly when one moves beyond the ties of family, kinship, ethnicity and other forms of bonding.” Consequently, Williams (2002, 79) argues, globalized organized crime remains—unlike multinational corporate conglomerates—deeply fractured and connected by loose alliances instead of organizational integration. “The flow of organized crime products and services is transnational; however, control of the flow is local.”⁶⁸

Mafia mobility is also exaggerated. The growth of cybercrime, offshore finances, and modern smuggling technologies has exacerbated the illusion.⁶⁹ But mafia transplantations are rare, difficult, and highly undesirable for gangsters. Federico Varese (2011) demonstrated that, transnational as it may be, organized crime is extremely hesitant to uproot itself. Between Mancur Olson’s (2000) “stationary” and “roving” bandits, globalized gangsters are decidedly the former.⁷⁰ On the rare occasions when mafias *are* mobile, they hardly acculturate in the destination society. Transplanted gangsters code switch and negotiate their own ethnicities as well as cultural reputations, precisely the way everybody else does.⁷¹ Thus the uprooted “Turkish” and “Russian”

mafias strategically instrumentalize ethnic stereotypes of Turkishness and Russianness to enforce obedience, instill fear, deter competitors, and avoid capture.

If anything, globalization has accentuated mafias' territoriality. As the modern nation-state refined its monitoring and surveillance capacities, organized crime has retreated from what Peter Andreas (2013) calls the "front door" (stations, harbors, and airports), to the "backdoor" (forests, deserts, and mountains) of transnational smuggling. Technical innovation tightened as many border crossings as it created: "The technologies, methods of transportation, and processes that are most liberated of territory are also the ones that move through global chokepoints, that have received the most aid from states, and thus, are the ones most subject to curtailment by state power, sometimes even nominal states power [i.e., separatists]." ⁷² Pressured to bypass such dangers, mafias and other "clandestine transnational groups," Justin Hastings (2010, 39) found, have increasingly become "dissociated from the state, and hence more dependent on difficult natural terrain." A globalized gangster must be competent at navigating obscure topography in periphery areas.

Where exactly are these territories in which today's global mafias are rooted? As it happens, they are precisely in regions rife with separatism. First, torn states tend to be in the middle of transnational organized crime routes. They are bridge societies for global smuggling paths: links between demand/destination and supply/source regions. ⁷³ Of the sixteen host states examined in this book, eight are bridges for one traffic (in narcotics, arms, or people), six countries are bridges for two, and two cases are bridges for all three contraband. The world's most lucrative migrant trafficking route—from sub-Saharan Africa to Europe—traverses Mali's breakaway Azawad. Global heroin flows, from Afghanistan and Pakistan to the United States and Western Europe, cross Kurdish and Albanian separatist lands. Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, and Kosovo may be landlocked, but are otherwise advantaged: these territories are situated in the middle of massive post-Soviet arms traffics. In global criminal supply chains, the mafia "middleman minority" lives in and around separatist lands.

Second, separatists are disproportionately concentrated in tough topographies—what James C. Scott (1998) called "illegible" spaces—where host state penetration is historically difficult. It is no coincidence that *Nagorno* in Nagorno-Karabakh means "mountainous." Kurdish and Albanian guerrillas hide in highlands, while desert terrain conceals Boko Haram, Agadez, and Azawad separatists. Among the cases in this book, Senegal's Casamance has arguably the most fortuitous separatist geography: amble forest, bushes, and mangroves to hide from the host state in all directions, not to mention an oddly slim territory (480 by 80 kilometers) tailor-made for narco-trafficking. ⁷⁴

If separatism is common in rough terrains, and rough terrains provide mafia opportunities, it is only natural that mafias are rooted in disputed territories.

PATRIMONIAL GOVERNANCE

Mafias are undoubtedly animated by greed, profit, and market share. But they are just as vigorously dedicated to governance.⁷⁵

Organized crime operates on patrimonialism: informal networks of patron-client relations enforced by personalistic rulers.⁷⁶ When governments are unable to meet security demands, mafias supply private protection to clients: citizens, families, tribes, businesses, churches, political parties, and—to be sure—social movements and insurgencies. A mafia “is performing governmental functions—law enforcement and criminal justice—in that sphere where the legal judicial system refuses to exercise power.”⁷⁷ Given how hybrid mafias are, organized criminal governance has been overtheorized.⁷⁸ For our purposes, suffice it to acknowledge that the administration underpinning this kind of rule can reach startling levels—including state-like capacities for extraction, surveillance, and service provision. Even Kalyvas (2015, 17), a leading skeptic regarding mafias’ impact, invites greater attention to how “criminal groups can out-administer the states they operate in and can evolve into institutions that resemble actual governments. Insofar as their rule is perceived as more real, and often even more legitimate, compared to the actual government’s, this strengthens their capacity to grow and develop.” This does not mean that profiteering is less important than patrimonial rule. A tired criminological debate has attempted to reduce mafias’ function to purely economic (profit) or purely political (governance) motivations. The two desiderata are inseparable.⁷⁹

Governance is, of course, not statehood. But in torn states, by definition, the aforementioned “sphere” of government capacity and legitimacy is narrow. As separatism escalates, mafias can inherit ever-larger spatial scope and power over sizable populations. Desperate to curb full-on secession, host states frequently sacrifice proper territorial sovereignty for tenuous, informal arrangements with regional tyrants. An “oft-observed truth of the Saharan political economy” of Niger and Mali, for instance, is that “for governments, controlling men is far more important than controlling territory.”⁸⁰ This presents opportunities for mafias to feign statehood and gangsters to become statesmen.

But there is a liability. Patrimonial systems, as Weber recognized, are inherently unstable. In patron-client ties, personalities matter and individual gangsters often prove irreplaceable. Charismatic leaders tend to delegate and deputize against meritocracy. Ambitious regional bosses routinely form alliances without permission, diversify their businesses beyond their turf, and attempt to replace higher-ups. Reluctant to abdicate, mafia heads frequently meet their demise in a violent blaze of glory. Disintegration is therefore common, after which criminals

reconfigure whatever network ties were operant into new ones. Accordingly, contrary to popular portrayals, organized crime is a short-term, fleeting enterprise. Durable mafias that persevere more than five years are exceptional, with the rule being “small groups of operators [who] take advantage of fortuitous opportunities, pulling off a few ‘deals’ before vanishing.”⁸¹

Finally, mafia governance is a cultural force to be reckoned with. Patrimonial systems enjoy certain advantages over tiresome, rationalized organizations like governments. They celebrate private interest, offer space for charismatic personality, and suggest visible, sensational pathways to success. In torn states, criminal icons serve as bulwarks against anomie and moral disintegration. Russian mafias, for example, “regard themselves as bastions of order and morality in the community.”⁸² From the United States to Nigeria, ethnographic studies of gangs document remarkable convergence: gangsters tend to be young, male, socioeconomically disadvantaged, and inspired by dynamic cultural templates of masculinity, empowerment, and justice.⁸³ In many societies, mafias are defenders of ethnic tradition and dominant employers offering paths to social mobility. Due to parental absence or displacement, gangster children typically lack adult supervision. Thus “the gang becomes a surrogate family,” a potent source of psychological and cultural fulfillment.⁸⁴

Profit aside, then, mafia governance is a vigorous moral order.

STRUCTURAL AMBIVALENCE

Most definitions of mafias begin in relation to the state, conceptualizing organized crime as a by-product. This not only underestimates mafias’ overall societal role. It neglects their twofold capacity for state building *and* state deformation—a crucial dualism that serves them especially well in torn states.

Mafias, like separatist movements, are technically nonstate actors. But all too often, “nonstate actors” serve as conceptual placeholders in societies we do not fully understand: “This term is unfortunate, as it does not accurately convey the nature of these groups. Organized crime may begin as a nonstate actor, hidden in the contours of the informal economy, but it can emerge into a state actor very quickly. Deposed racketeers can also transition into post-state actors or deterritorialized militias.”⁸⁵ The “state” to which nonstate actors are contrasted is typically understood as a strong, consolidated government. The custom is then to distinguish three criminal interactions—predatory, parasitic, and symbiotic—with this government.⁸⁶ In this perspective, mafias are modest, apolitical agents who react to—but cannot determine—the fate of states.

This outlook is modeled on countries that are convenient to study, lush in data, and recognizable to traditional criminology. In torn states, the biological metaphor quickly fails. The “social organism,” as Durkheimians would put it, is literally splitting in separatist contexts. Mafias have choices as to which of two

and sometimes three “organisms” to be predatory, symbiotic, or parasitic toward. Even without separatist war, torn states offer multiple sets of mutually exclusive institutions—political offices, security forces, financial bodies, and border administrations—to engage. Mafias in torn states have the luxury of being picky.

An alternative approach is to conceptualize mafias as agents involved in state building and state destruction—not as peripheral aids or spoilers, but as independent players determining government capacity and steering nationalist politics. When conditions allow, “criminal syndicates function like mini-states.”⁸⁷ Charles Tilly (1985, 169) immortalized this theme in calling modern states our “largest examples of organized crime.” Even outside separatist zones, mafias are independently capable of co-opting and even creating state structures. The trajectory from mafia to state organ has been case studied in Pakistan, Indonesia, Japan, and New York City.⁸⁸

In torn states, the path from organized crime to government is even shorter. Separatist movements, after all, are states in the making. When mobilizing successfully, they create lawless zones of governmental retreat. Host states often respond with administrative overstretch. Conveniently enough, both too little *and* too much of the state generates mafias. “Excessive bureaucratic power” incubates organized crime just as easily as sudden power vacuums or “abdications” by the government.⁸⁹ Since both options are signatures of torn states, the incentive to multiply governments grows. “Contrary to a widespread perception,” Francesco Strazzari (2003, 158) explains, the “emergence of small, almost stifled states, devoid of institutional autonomy and of margins of maneuver in the international arena, seems to be the condition in which mafia structures and practices thrive. In this way, mafias can often go as far as to take hostage the development of state structures.” On the one hand, then, organized crime can certainly be a force of “state deformation.”⁹⁰ On the other, mafias can just as easily be nation builders, creating administrative apparatuses for extraction and coercion in their turf.⁹¹ This remarkable dualism—the ability to thrive off both state strength and weakness—is the singular power of mafias in separatist contexts.

WAR

Not all separatists wage war. But when they do, it is easier with a mafia in one’s corner.

The genealogy of states through war making has endowed a fundamental similarity between what states and gangsters do. “Banditry, piracy, gangland rivalry, policing and war making all belong on the same continuum.”⁹² In torn states—where civil controls over militaries are weak, the flow of armed personnel and equipment is unregulated, and unaccountable foreign troops circulate—criminal opportunities arise.

Mafias may originate as mere servants of warring parties. But their power can grow spectacularly, frequently matching a “side” in civil war. The “ability of criminal war economies to subsist in post-war environments,” Jessica West (2002, 8) argues, “suggests that in many cases the control of territory is dependent on criminal organizations more so than on a guerrilla or terrorist presence.” Organized crime, Andreas (2004a, 49) adds, “can contribute to the outbreak and persistence of war, but also to its conclusion.” When a separatist entity is borne of war, “criminal actors can contribute to the looting of the country, but also to its survival.” Once up and running, mafia gains can be irreversible.⁹³ Afghanistan is a paradigmatic case, where the clash between the Taliban and Northern Alliance was fatefully determined by narco-mafias: “Both parties relied heavily on income from the opium economy to finance the war, however neither one of them controlled the drug trade.”⁹⁴ Waves of violence in Afghanistan have come and gone ever since, but this autonomous organized crime continues to dominate politics and the economy.⁹⁵

Lastly, separatist zones have another mafia magnet: foreign troops. The mere presence of an international administration—civilian or military—is a natural opportunity for transnational organized crime, notably in narcotics and sex trafficking. The discomfiting public secret of international peacekeeping—armed, lonely young men on dull missions—is that it unfailingly produces blossoming prostitution in the locality.⁹⁶

Modeling the Relationship

What remains is to take up Kalyvas’s (2015) challenge to cross-fertilize crime and insurgency research. On this path, I follow in the footsteps of a set of inventive interdisciplinary studies that bridge the analytic gap between torn states and organized crime.⁹⁷ Subsequent chapters develop two ways to understand the relationship between separatism and mafias: a Simmelian triadic model of state-separatist-mafia relations, and a typology of mafias according to how *state dependent* and *partisan* they are. The triadic model is a high-resolution analytic tool, useful for the in-depth analysis of separatist trajectories in a limited number of cases (Serbia and Georgia). The mafia typology is a lower-resolution tool, useful for macroanalytic overviews across entire regions (West Africa, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe). Below I sketch each in turn (for details, see the appendix).

SIMMELIAN TRIADS

In part 2, I conceptualize mafia roles in Serbia (Kosovo) and Georgia (South Ossetia) from 1989 to 2012. By “zooming in” to these paired cases, we begin to understand what it means for organized crime to be an independent agent,

not mere epiphenomenon (chapter 3), which can filter regional smuggling opportunities into separatist success (chapter 4) and manage the stigma of nefarious criminal activity (chapter 5). The mafia's role, I argue, was a major reason that separatism was more successful in Kosovo than in South Ossetia.

Intuitively, we imagine a two-sided contest between the separatist movement and government. Yet students of mafia-infested torn states rightly conclude that this dyadic vision is limited. "But once one abandons the analytic simplification of the two-player approach—the state vs. the insurgent terrorists, the red team vs. the blue team, our guys vs. their guys—where does one go next?"⁹⁸ One goes to Simmelian triads. Georg Simmel's great insight was that seemingly tangential social actors can fundamentally shape the relationship between another pair of actors who appear—due to our analytic bias—to be solely relevant. His examples ranged from impish bachelors vis-à-vis a troubled married couple to power-hungry kingdoms vis-à-vis Anglo-Saxon and Norman nations. In triadic forms, what matters is not so much the relative strength of the two most salient parties. Rather, the overall relational form can empower a less apparent third party to play a decisive role.⁹⁹ When spouses fight, a mischievous bachelor can destroy the marriage. When two nations bleed each other dry, an ambitious regional power can devour both. In such circumstances, neglecting the third yields poor explanations of what happened.

Applying this approach, instead of thinking about separatism in terms of two actors, we must consider three: the host state, separatist movement, *and* mafias. Their triadic relations taken holistically help us better understand torn states. To be sure, tremendous asymmetries exist between the first two and organized crime. But it is precisely because separatists and governments confront each other that mafias gain in relevance. Just as small parliamentary parties, otherwise weak and insignificant, sometimes acquire decisive voting leverage when larger political parties collide, so can mafias acquire enormous power when host state and separatist movement collide. Concretely, three mafia roles in triadic forms prove useful for our purposes: the rejoicing third, divider and ruler, and mediator.

First, a rejoicing third (*tertius gaudens*) has an advantage "resulting from the fact that the remaining two hold each other in check and he can make a gain that one of the two would otherwise deny him," as when a financial broker plays parties against each other, or "because action by one of the two parties brings [advantage] about for its own purposes—the *tertius* does not need to take the initiative," as when foreign investments in a region increase as neighboring regions' rioters disrupt each other's economies. In Serbia and Georgia, as we will see, mafias initially grew as rejoicing thirds. Second, a divider and ruler (*divisor et imperator*) proactively creates conflict between the two in order to secure a dominant position or other gains, as when an empire creates borders to sever the ethnic or religious unity of potentially

rebellious populations. In Kosovo, the mafia assumed a spectacular role of divider and ruler, propelling the separatist movement into secession. Finally, a mediator assuages the factors that produce tension between the remaining two—he “functions as an arbiter who balances . . . their contradictory claims against one another and eliminates what is incompatible,” as when a child brings parents together, or mediators boost negotiations between labor and management.¹⁰⁰ In South Ossetia, organized crime played an incredible role as mediator, deflating secession and boosting Georgian-Ossetian cooperation through smuggling.

TYPOLOGY OF MAFIAS

What kinds of mafias are there in separatist zones more generally? In part 3, we zoom out to survey four types of mafias in torn states in three regions: fourteen countries with separatist movements (four in West Africa, five in the Middle East, and five in Eastern Europe) from 1989 to 2019. In each of these cases, I argue, territorial consolidation was vitally molded by organized criminal agency.

I will arrive at two simple findings: some mafias are more embedded in governments (*state dependent*) than others, and some mafias are more ethnocentric (*partisan*) than others. Regarding state dependence, I differentiate between organized crime that is largely controlled—often created—by host state institutions, and organized crime that largely operates autonomously. Regarding partisanship, I differentiate between mafias that are highly ethnocentric, and those that are less so.

State dependent mafias are indispensably patronized by host state institutions (government, military, police, and state enterprises), sustaining their rackets from within the state apparatus. Independent mafias, though they engage corrupt government officials (through bribery, blackmail, and co-optation), largely operate autonomously and sustain rackets despite—not through—host state institutions. The basic litmus test is: If the host state were to collapse at dawn, would this mafia persevere and sustain its basic racket?

Partisan mafias are ethnocentric in their composition and territorial localization, which gives them a strong preference for one side or another in separatist disputes. Even if transnational, their rackets are clearly tilted in favor of either the separatist movement or host state. Impartial mafias, in contrast, lack allegiances: they just as easily finance, protect, arm, or agitate for separatism as against it. Here the litmus test is: When separatist tensions escalate, does this mafia take sides in the dispute?

These are idealizations. No mafia is entirely independent of governments, nor are state-run mafias entirely loyal to their patrons and creators. Even the

TABLE 1. Typology of Mafias

	Partisan	Impartial
State dependent	<i>Mafias in uniform</i> in Nigeria, Turkey, Serbia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan	<i>Minderbinder mafias</i> in Bosnia-Herzegovina / Autonomous Province of Western Bosnia , Yemen / Houthi North , and Ukraine/ Donbas
Independent	<i>Rebel mafias</i> in Azawad , Casamance , Boko Haram , Kurdistan , Gaza , Islamic State , Greater Albania , Kosovo , Crimea , Transnistria , and Nagorno-Karabakh	<i>Cosmopolitan mafias</i> in Niger/ Agadez , Cameroon/ Ambazonia , and Georgia / South Ossetia

Notes: Separatist movements are in bold. Mafias in uniform is inspired by Élise Massicard’s (2010) analysis of Turkish “gangsters in uniform” against Kurds. Minderbinder mafias refers to Joseph Heller’s immortal character in *Catch-22*, Milo Minderbinder, the prototypical war profiteer; embedded in the military, Mindbinder undermines war efforts on all sides.

most fanatically ethnocentric gangsters sometimes sabotage their ethnonational “side” in a separatist conflict, while impartial gangsters sometimes adopt pro- and antiseparatist actions. But polarization on both dimensions is a critical, if neglected, reality of today’s torn states. The resulting two by two produces a four-category typology of mafias explaining their varying roles. Table 1 summarizes the types, plotting all upcoming cases of separatism.

Mafias in uniform. In this type, gangsters are subcontractors. The host state—typically the security apparatus—either creates a mafia or instrumentalizes existing organized crime to fight separatism. Recruiting in prisons and neighborhoods as well as from its own corrupt ranks, the host state coordinates hired guns, procures dirty money, and smuggles precious contraband. Supplementing legal antiseparatist measures, mafias in uniform are a clandestine tool for infiltrating, subverting, and killing separatists. These loyal gangsters are typically enlisted from the titular ethnic constituency, but may include “turncoats” from the targeted separatist community. In this scenario, gangsters become statesmen at the behest and invitation of the government. Regime

self-defense and sometimes survival depends on them. In this sense, mafias in uniform are a force for conservation.

Minderbinder mafias. Here, gangsters are loose cannons. Initially, the host state empowered—and may have even created—them as servants of the state. Their independent criminal capacity grows, however, as they “convert their political resources (principally their links with official actors and their skill in the use of violence) into criminal activities” outside the state’s initial purpose.¹⁰¹ Due to government incompetence or weakness, the gangsters’ ability to smuggle, extort, and profiteer with impunity takes on a life of its own. Their rackets—notably selling government arms to “the enemy”—subvert and undermine their host state patrons. By catalyzing conflict, perpetuating divisions, and incentivizing confrontation with separatists, Minderbinder mafias are a centrifugal force.

Rebel mafias. These gangsters are allies of the separatist movement. Unlike mafias in uniform, rebel mafias become statesmen *uninvited*—through coups, rebellions, and wars. They were not created or monitored by government organs, nor do they require state patronage to profiteer. Rebel mafias are firmly rooted in minority ethnic communities, where rackets service their separatist brethren at the expense of the host state. Control over smuggling routes—cocaine into Azawad, oil into Iraq, and arms into Kosovo—empowers gangsters as brokers, suppliers, and partners to separatists. In desperate moments of nationalist liberation, a rebel mafia can be the decisive ingredient for secessionist success.

Cosmopolitan mafias. In this category, gangsters are peacemakers. True wonders of globalization, these organized criminals connect divided ethnic communities that share a demand for security, employment, and contraband. Multiethnic in composition, cosmopolitan mafias specialize in smuggling transnationally across polarized populations. They are skeptical of ethnonational confrontation and conflict, which—given their rackets—is bad for business. They prefer stalemate (sometimes called “frozen conflict”), where borders remain disputed, jurisdictions unclear, and cross-ethnic trading illicit. They have little desire to become formal political figureheads. Unlike Minderbinder mafias (disintegrative and centrifugal), cosmopolitan mafias are an integrative, centripetal force.

To be clear, predatory opportunism characterizes all four types. Whatever their politics, mafias form cynical “marriages of convenience” to protect their rackets.¹⁰² But they do not do so arbitrarily. Gangsters pursue opportunism *within* the structural confines of their levels of dependency (Are they state creations or clients?) and ethnocentrism (Do they have a dog in the separatist fight?). Impartial mafias reject both nationalist projects (separatist and host state) because it suits their interests. Partisan mafias, similarly, take nationalist positions because there is a congruence of one nationalism (or another) with their profiteering. Across the board, it is a Weberian elective affinity between profit and ideology.